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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the applicability of Beck's cognitive theory of depression to non-clinical adolescents. Specifically, adolescents' personal and future information processes (i.e., two content areas of the cognitive triad) were examined as a function of their self-reported levels of depression and cognitive vulnerability to depression. Ninth- through 12th-graders (N=84) completed several instruments, including the Beck Depression Inventory, the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale, the Hopelessness Scale, and measures of student's recall of both positive and negative self-referent adjectives. The results of a canonical correlational analysis revealed that students' levels of depression (and to a lesser extent, levels of cognitive vulnerability to depression) were significantly related to their negative expectancies towards the future, as predicted. However, support was not found for the relationships between levels of depression, cognitive vulnerability to depression, and students' personal information processes. The findings suggest that Beck's cognitive theory of depression may have limited applicability for understanding and explaining depression in a non-clinical adolescent subject population. (Author/NB)

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The Effects of Depression and Cognitive Vulnerability to Depression on the Cognitive Processes of Non-Clinical Adolescents

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the 1990 Society for Research on Adolescence, Atlanta, Georgia.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the applicability of Beck's cognitive theory of depression to non-clinical adolescents. Specifically, adolescents' personal and future information processes (i.e., two content areas of the cognitive triad) were examined as a function of their self-reported levels of depression and cognitive vulnerability to depression. Eighty-four ninth through twelfth grade students participated in the study. The results of a canonical correlational analysis revealed that students' levels of depression (and to a lesser extent, levels of cognitive vulnerability to depression) were significantly related to their negative expectancies towards the future, as predicted. However, support was not found for the relationships between levels of depression, cognitive vulnerability to depression, and students' personal information processes. Conclusions regarding the applicability of Beck's theory to non-clinical adolescents, however, must remain tentative. Future research addressing the sampling and methodological limitations of the present study is indicated.

The Effects of Depression and Cognitive Vulnerability to Depression on the Cognitive Processes of Non-Clinical Adolescents

Depression in adolescents is a major public health problem. However, there has been relatively little research that has attempted to clarify and explain the nature of adolescent depression from a theoretical perspective. Although a number of conceptual models and/or theories have been proposed to describe and explain depression in adults (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Beck, 1974), little attention has been devoted to applying these models to research on depression as it exists in adolescents.

The present study investigated the applicability of Beck's cognitive theory of depression to non-clinical adolescents. Beck's theory was utilized to guide the specific hypotheses relevant to adolescents' personal information processes and future expectancies (i.e., two content areas of the cognitive triad) as a function of their self-reported levels of depression and cognitive vulnerability to depression. Two paradigms used in previous investigations of depression in adults, the self-reference incidental recall and hypothesis testing paradigms, were employed to assess personal information processes, whereas expectancies towards the future were assessed by the Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al., 1974).

Method

Subjects and Procedure

Eighty-four students, 41 males and 43 females, were recruited from the ninth through twelth grade levels of a rural high school in the northeast (mean age of 15.46 (SD = 1.23)). The students were

administered several instruments (in counterbalanced order) designed to assess the predictor and criterion variables of interest. Testing was conducted in group situations on two consecutive days due to time limitations.

With respect to the predictor variables, each student's self-reported levels of depression and cognitive vulnerability to depression were assessed by the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI: Beck et al., 1961) and the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS: Weissman & Beck, 1978), respectively. In addition, students were randomly assigned to a Hypothesis Condition (either elated or depressed).

With respect to the criterion variables, the strategy or frequency of confirmatory and disconfirmatory attributes reported by each student to test a personal hypothesis of either elation or depression served as the first two criterion measures (Strohmer, Moilanen, & Barry, 1988). The remaining three criterion measures consisted of student's recall of both positive (non-depressed content) and negative (depressed content) self-referent adjectives on an incidental recall task (Kuiper, Derry, & MacDonald, 1982), as well as their scores on the Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al., 1974).

Results

The results of a canonical correlational analysis indicated that a student's level of depression, cognitive vulnerability to depression, and hypothesis condition were significantly related to their personal and future information processes (Wilk's Lambda = .446; $F(15, 182.6) = 4.13$, $p < .001$). Specifically, as the results in Table 1 reveal, two significant canonical roots were extracted from the analysis of

this model. The structure of the first root suggests a strong, positive relationship between students' levels of depression and scores on the Hopelessness Scale, whereas the second root suggests a strong relationship between a student's assigned Hypothesis Condition and the frequency of Confirmatory and/or Disconfirmatory Attributes reported to test the personal hypothesis (i.e., in general, students reported a greater number of Confirmatory Attributes to test an Elated Hypothesis and a greater number of Disconfirmatory Attributes to test a Depressed Hypothesis).

Discussion

The results suggest that Beck's cognitive theory of depression may have limited applicability for understanding and explaining depression in a non-clinical adolescent subject population. In support of the theory, students' negative expectancies towards the future were found to be positively related to their self-reported levels of depression, and to a lesser extent, levels of cognitive vulnerability to depression. However, such support did not generalize to a second content area of Beck's cognitive triad, namely students' personal information processes. Specifically, students' self-reference recall and personal hypothesis testing strategies were not found to be related to their levels of depression and/or cognitive vulnerability to depression. Future research is therefore indicated employing adolescent subject populations representing a broader range of depression and age levels, as well as the use of alternative modes of data collection to assess the predictor and criterion variables of interest.

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Table 1

Canonical Correlation Coefficients, Standardized Canonical Coefficients (SCC), and Structure Coefficients (SC) for the Canonical Roots of the Hypothesized Model

	Canonical Roots			
	I		II	
Correlation Coefficients				
R_c	.61		.49	
R_c^2	.38		.24	
Variables	SCC	SC	SCC	SC
Criterion Variables:				
Confirmatory Attributes	- .09	- .43	.66	.80
Disconfirmatory Attributes	.02	.05	- .48	- .88
Positive Recall	-.16	- .33	- .17	- .11
Negative Recall	.30	.21	- .03	- .11
Hopelessness	.90	.95	.27	.11
Predictor Variables:				
Level of Depression	.74	.93	.16	.07
Level of Cogn. Vulnerability	.41	.75	- .02	- .04
Hypothesis Condition	.04	.13	-1.00	- .99

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